

*Sharon Page Ritchie

*Combahee River Collective

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K: The first one's [question] actually---I have something from the Combahee archives which is a---it looks like a survey about a retreat and---I think you're the same Sharon Page Ritchie. Were you involved with the NBFO chapter in Chicago?

S: Um-hm. Yeah.

K: Okay, great, 'cause they're one of the groups that I'm researching, so I guess I wanted to ask you about NBFO first. Do you recall joining that Chicago chapter?

S: Um, yeah, I went to---let's see. I had a friend who was part of---I'm trying to remember---I don't remember exactly now what the connections were, but I had a friend who was part of it and told me about the meeting. The first meeting that I went to was in Hyde Park at Linda Powell's house---apartment---and there were maybe a dozen---a dozen women there. I couldn't really say.

? see
minutes ???
probably a
C-r mtg.

K: So was that your first contact with NBFO? Through the Chicago chapter?

S: Um, yeah, I sort of---I knew Margaret Sloan and I had heard---there was a conference in Detroit that I didn't go to, but I knew about it and I think that was before. I think that was the first thing.

K: Do you recall how long you were involved with the Chicago chapter?

S: Um, no. My recollection was that it wasn't around for that long a period of time and that I was involved with it for much of the time that it did exist.

K: Okay. So from this form that was sent to Combahee---I don't know if you recall this, but I can read you just a part of it that I was curious about. It says, "The small NBFO chapter we had exhausted itself in trying to counter Brenda Eichelberger. We never got much past C-R and eventually we stopped meeting for that. How have other women dealt with women who claim to be feminists, yet behave in very anti-woman, anti-lesbian ways. We have one such woman here who is assumed by many women in the movement, and by the media who are interested, to be THE voice of black feminism." So I was wondering if you could just tell me what that was about.

S: What which part of it was about?

K: What---were there---did you feel like Brenda Eichelberger was sort of running the whole---was the voice of black feminism and didn't leave room for---

S: You know, I really don't remember a lot of that 'cause there was something about that---there was a lot of kind of interpersonal squabbles and so on. I don't really remember a lot of the details of those things. I mean, I know that there were some people who had---I remember that there was---I can't remember what the problem was. I remember that there was some difficulty, something that we were trying to do. And I remember spending a lot of time fussing amongst ourselves and not doing some of the bigger things that we said we wanted to do. But I'm not the one to remember all the details about those things. So I'm afraid I can't help you. I remember the name and I remember her somewhat, but not real well. She's not somebody that I continued to be in touch with. But I couldn't get into any details 'cause I don't remember any details.

K: But from what it sounds like---it sounds like perhaps there was some heterosexism going on also that was getting in the way of getting activities done.

S: Yeah, I think so. Let's see. I'm trying to remember exactly what was happening at what point. This might have been about the same time as the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was just getting started. And I was friends with some of people who were involved with that, so I went to the first couple of festivals. And I

remember just going and seeing all these women building all these stages and doing all this electrical work and all these things that I hadn't really seen women do very much before. Something that needed to be done---you know, lifted or carried or moved or something---that I think Brenda decided that a man needed to be involved to do it and it was, like, nothing really too big. And I remember thinking, in a couple of different contexts, but this was one of them, that it was ridiculous that women felt like they needed men to take care of those things.

K: That women who purported to be feminists were---

S: Yeah.

K: Okay. So were these mostly black women who were involved with the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival?

S: No, they were mostly white and there were some others who were different--- neither white nor black, but mostly white.

K: Okay, well, I'll move onto the Combahee questions. Do you recall how long you participated in Combahee?

S: Um, I can't tell you the exact number of years, but it was several years. From the first retreat to the last retreat I didn't go to 'cause I had moved out here and I was broke by that point. So it was shortly after I moved out here, which was 1980. So from whenever the first one was until 1979 or if there was one, like, in early 1980 there might have been one.

1977-1979

K: And do you recall how you got involved with Combahee?

S: I was good friends with Demita in Chicago. And so when they were putting together the people that they were going to invite, I was on the list.

K: So then Demita moved to Boston. How long were you in Boston?

S: I never lived in Boston.

K: Oh, okay.

S: I visited Boston. I went to the retreats, but I was not a member of the actual Collective because I didn't live in Boston.

K: Okay, so did you go from Chicago to the Bay Area?

S: Yeah, I lived in Chicago until 1980 and I did a lot of travelling. I did temp work so I was, you know, I could do that anywhere. And I had good friends in Boston and good friends in New York, so I would go and plan my trip to the retreat and then hang out and visit for a while before or after.

K: Okay, so how would you say the retreats were connected with Combahee?

S: Well, since I wasn't actually in the Collective itself, my perspective was from somebody who was only at the retreats and my sense of it was that the Combahee River Collective was an on-going group in Boston that did a lot of different things and that these retreats were one of the kinds of things that they did.

K: Okay, that helps clear up some things. So who would you say were the actual---I don't know---would you say people who were the "core" of Combahee? First of all, were people who came to the retreats considered members of Combahee or not?

S: Well, I don't know that---my sense is no, but I don't know if there was a reason to be---I mean, it wasn't like there was a club ring or a jacket or something that you got if you were in the core and not if you weren't. So I think for some things, you know, everybody who went to the retreats was considered part of the greater Combahee network and then for other things there were the day-to-day people who were there. And I would say the core group, my understanding of the core group was Demita, Barbara and Beverly, and another woman whose name has just escaped me. I knew it five minutes ago.

K: It'll probably come back to you. Did you belong to any other organizations prior to your involvement with Combahee? Did you do any civil rights or student work? Labor?

S: No, I was---I came out at the University of Chicago in college and so I went to some of the meetings of the Chicago Lesbian Liberation, which later became Women's Caucus---or I guess, first it was the Women's Caucus of Chicago Gay Liberation and then became the Chicago Lesbian Liberation. So I was part of that and then NBFO. But I would say probably before that no.

previous
activism -
Chicago

K: So from the retreats you went to, are there certain events or discussions that stand out for you?

S: There was---really there was a lot. There were lots of things and I kind of---you know, I have images of little bits of things and then generally a larger sense of a lot of things going on. One thing that I remember very distinctly was the first time that I danced for the retreat group and that was a big deal for me. I hadn't been dancing---I hadn't performed very much before that and there was---there were a lot of writers and people didn't do so much other kinds of things. So I wasn't quite sure how my dancing would be received. I think people like dancing, you know, we would have parties and stuff like that. People liked to dance, but a dance as a performance was not something that anybody else was likely to do. I mean, and when people shared their work it mostly was written work. I don't recall, like, any visual art and somebody may have done some music at one point, but I don't recall specifically. You know, I remember a lot of discussions about a lot of different things---

K: Before you answer that, so how was your dancing received?

S: Well, it was interesting because people were very, very quiet and I wasn't really quite prepared for that. You know, they applauded at the end and so on, but I had become accustomed to hearing---I was belly dancing so I was accustomed to hearing some on-going response---you know, clapping along with the music and some of that kind of stuff. And I remember, at one point, looking up at my arm and seeing that I had forgotten to put on my bracelets so I didn't even have the sound of my bracelets there and it was very, very, very quiet. I think people really liked it, but they didn't know how to respond to it in the middle of it, so it was interesting. I'm glad I did it. It was a big deal for me.

K: Did you dance after that for other retreats?

S: I don't think I did. I danced for other things with some of the same people there, but I don't think I danced again for any of the retreats. I did at one point do a movement, you know, people would bring stuff and talk about their work and whatnot and so on. Audre, I remember, would do that a lot. And there was at one point, I came and---I think Demita and I might have done it together---led a---tried to lead a dance and movement thing and people were actually very shy. We didn't have very many people that actually participated. They had kind of wandered off.

K: Do you think they were more comfortable with writing?

S: Yeah.

K: So you were about to talk about different discussions you remember having.

S: Yeah. I don't know if I could tell you specific---you know, this one time somebody said such and such a thing. I remember Audre reading Tar Beach [correct title?] to us and that was just about the time, just shortly after she had written it or while she was writing it. And, again, I remember people not quite

knowing how to respond to it. You know, liking it very much, but sort of being surprised at the---I think really being kind of surprised at the sexuality of it, you know, the overt sexuality of the language.

I can remember places---I'm better at remembering the specific details if I have somebody else there with me to say, "You remember such and such a thing happened?"

K: Well, I have some agendas from the retreat. I don't know if that would help to jog your memory about---

S: Well, I'm kind of curious about what kind of thing you're looking for.

K: Well, with some of the other groups I've been studying it's been a little bit easier because they were more formalized organizations so I could say, "Well, what committee did you serve on?" or "How was it run structurally?" But with Combahee it's a little different because it was a collective and I'm trying to get an idea of how the retreats fit into the overall picture. Because really the only thing you hear about Combahee is the statement. I'm just trying to get into some more detail.

S: I think that the retreats---I think the most important function of the retreats was kind of a brainstorming. That it was a concentrated time for people who were in different places---geographically in different places and working on some different thing, but you know, some similar things to get together and talk for a really long time about, you know, what we were doing and what we were thinking about and what was the next thing to do. And, you know, understanding what was going on around us. I think that it was really important as a catalyst for a lot of people's work. I think that as---that the coming together and bringing things and reading and talking and bringing ideas and projects and so on together and then getting comments and feedback and seeing what other people were thinking. I think that kind of stuff really helped people in developing their own work. I think as far as the retreats go, I can't point to a project or a building or something and say, "Oh, Combahee did this," but I think that Combahee was important in the development of Kitchen Table Press, for example. And not necessarily in a kind of a straight line way of, you know, "Well, this stuff got written and we need to make up a publishing house to print it." And in some of the work that Cheryl Clarke was doing with Conditions [a lesbian feminist journal] I think that Combahee was part of that. So I think it was really in the connections with each other. The brainstorming and the conversations and the hanging out together that was really the most important thing about it for me.

retreats -
retreats

K: It sounds like it's sort of a place where, since you didn't live in Boston or that area---like, a place where you could go to get your batteries recharged and other people would bring ideas there also and sort of hash those out?

S: Yeah, and we met in different places. We met in New Haven, we met in North Hampton, we met in D.C., we met in---someplace else. I think someplace in New York City. So we met in different places. We weren't always in the same spot. We had places that were loaned to us by different people. We did meet in Boston at least a couple of times. At least once. I don't know about a couple of times. But we were in---I don't know who all these people were, but they were somebody who knew somebody. And they would sort of just loan us their house for the weekend. And so we would all be there. They would go away. Well, for the most part 'cause they were not people who were involved. They were, like, friends of the Combahee River Collective and not members of it.

K: Do you recall if there were any particular requirements for membership or, like, agreeing with the statement that was written?

S: I don't know that there was a formal requirement that you sign up to agree with the statement. I think that for the most part people who came to the retreats were invited by somebody who was in the Collective---at least, for the first retreat or first couple of retreats and after that were invited by somebody who was in the Collective or who had been to one of the last retreats. So, I think there was a certain amount of---it was, in a lot of ways, self-selected.

I think that we did have---we went through a lot of discussion about relations between lesbians and straight women and what was the---I think that we did not have a specific requirement that people who come to the

retreats be lesbian. And we had some discussions about, well, you know, what does "black" mean? Because there were---at some points there were Latina women---Cuban or Puerto Rican---some of us would consider black and some of us would not consider black. So we had some discussions about what does it mean to be black. 'Cause it was, as far as I knew, it was always a black women's organization.

K: And do you know if any women who identified as black, who were Puerto Rican or Asian or Chicana came to the retreats?

S: Yeah, we had at least a couple of women who were Hispanic, Cuba and---I think, at least one Cuban and at least one Puerto Rican. I can't remember everybody over the whole time, but there were two who come to mind.

K: So were there also straight women who came, too, or was that just a discussion?

S: We did have some straight women at some point. You know, the people that I really member, the people that I really remember connecting with for the most part were women who identified as lesbian. You know, we did have---I don't know. We probably had a couple who came out over the course of the years that we met.

K: And do you recall talking about what it means---do you consider yourself a socialist?

S: Yeah.

K: So do you recall discussions about that?

S: Yeah, yeah. I know it was something that we talked about and I don't know that we got into the various kind of SWP and all the discussions about the Trotskyists and Lenin---I don't know that we got into all that kind of stuff. Just sort of a general sense of socialist in the sense of "for each according to their capacities" and "to each according to their needs".

Socialism

K: And as far as allies or coalition work---I guess, in terms of the retreat you said that there were friends of friends who loaned houses and facilities to use for the meetings, but do you recall any other sort of assistance that the retreats or Combahee received.

S: I don't know about what kinds of things Combahee did, you know, what kinds of things in their actual Collective---what kinds of things that they had or allies they had. As far as the---as far as the retreats, I think that the majority of whatever kind of assistance we had from other people was that sort of "in-kind" housing. I don't know that there was---there may have been some money. I don't know anything about that.

K: So did you then pay a fee for the retreats?

S: I'm trying to remember. I don't really remember. I'm sure we must have 'cause we had a lot of really good food. But I don't really remember and I'm pretty sure that we did not have to pay for whatever housing or lodging. I don't remember, though. It wasn't like---I don't remember it being a big issue.

K: So probably your transportation was the biggest expenditure?

S: Yeah. The other thing---I know that there were some projects that Combahee did in collaboration with other organizations. I couldn't tell you specifically what those were. I know there was a---I don't know whether this was a Combahee project or whether this was a project of some people who were in Combahee and some other people, but Olivia Records had a group called "The Varied Voices of Black Women," that was several of their artists---Pat Parker, Linda Tillery, Gwen Avery, and somebody else---oh, Mary Watkins. Who toured around the country---I'm not sure if they might have even gone outside the country. But they toured around the country and performed in a lot of different places and I know that they did perform in Boston during one of the times that I was there. And there was a group of mixed---a racially mixed group of women who were involved in putting that concert together and doing all that kind of stuff.

Olivia

S: So I don't whether that was specifically a fundraiser for Combahee or a project of Combahee or whether it was just that some of the people who were involved in doing the concert, or in the Varied Voices, were also part of the Combahee group.

K: Do you recall talking about the pamphlet that was put out about the twelve Black women who were murdered. I think it started out as six black women.

S: Yeah, I remember that there was a lot of concern and a lot of activism about that. I don't remember--- I'm sure---I know that there was some kind of statement about it. I don't remember the specific details about when that happened or how it happened.

K: So you moved to the Bay Area and then, basically, couldn't afford to commute over the retreats, but why do you think the organization doesn't exist anymore or those retreats stopped happening?

S: Oh, I don't know. I think in some ways it just kind of, you know, it's time passed. There had been discussions, you know, people have talked to me over the years about, "Oh, well, we should get together again," or, "We should have a reunion." I don't know. I mean, I think some of it was people getting burned out. I think some of it was people moving to different area and having different concerns and issues and stuff that they were worrying about. I think some of it was, you know, interpersonal stuff. People getting upset with each other and not wanting to see each other. You know, but I think it's---

decline

K: And are you still in touch with Demita Frazier?

S: I have not been in a while, in a few years.

K: Do you know if she's still in the Boston area?

S: As far as I know she is.

K: And do you know the whereabouts of any former members?

S: Oh, actually someone who was a member later than I am and actually is---I think she's Asian. African-Asian.

K: Margo Okazawa-Rey?

S: Yeah, yeah. So Margo's here. Linda Powell is in D.C. as far as I know. I hear from her every---about once a year. Who else? Let me see. Somebody told me---there's somebody that I saw---Cheryl. I just saw Cheryl earlier this summer and she is in New Jersey.

K: Is she still at Rutgers?

S: Uh-huh.

K: Okay.

S: You know, I've run into---I'm sure where, whatever happened to Beverly. I ran into Barbara several years ago. I'm trying to remember when it was, but there was some big event someplace that I ran into her at, but I'm not really in contact with her on an on-going basis.

K: Well, those are all of my questions. Is there anything you wanted to add about the experience or anything that you think is important that people should know about it?

S: Well, I think that it was, you know, I think the most important thing about it was that it provided this sounding board for a lot of us to develop our ideas about our own work. And I think that there was a certain kind of attitude that the only legitimate political work was being out on the barricades. It was actually

form of activism

Audre Lorde who I think was very important for me in talking about, you know, in validating that each of us had our own work and what we were good at and what was important to us and we needed to be doing that and speaking up and having our voices heard. So I felt like even though my work was less written, or was more other kinds of things than many of the women there, that it was still important for me to do it. And that it was political. I don't know. It's---um. Yeah, I think---there's nothing else I can think of really.

K: I think that's very important for black feminists coming up today to be reminded of that. Well thank you very much for your time.

[Sharon Page Ritchie asks for me to tell her again exactly what I'm working on. I do so.]

S: I think one of the things that we did talk about was this whole question about class and I think that's one of the very difficult things for black feminists. I think the class and the sexual orientation issues kind of went together and there were certain elements, and probably I would say still are certain elements, of the black intelligencia or the black community that would say, you know, that black lesbians and black middle class women are not---can't be feminists or that these are the women who are feminists, but that means that they are not really black. There was a lot of discussion sort of in the culture-at-large about what was "black enough" and being a feminist was one of those things that black women didn't do. So we spent a lot of time talking about, you know, well, saying that that wasn't true. And some of that was kind of talking to each other so we knew that, but also trying to figure out how to articulate that in the larger discussion.

I think we had a lot of discussions about class. There were a lot of us who were involved---in academia in one way or another. So I think that whole question about what does it mean for a black person to be middle class. 'Cause there's the money question and then there's the education question and then there's the values question and, you know, all those things. And even so all of that---whatever distinctions there may be within the black community are set within a racist society. I mean, the joke about what do you call a black person with a PhD---that means, you know. You know what they call---[laughter; K: Yeah.]. So it's like it doesn't really matter in some ways and then in other ways, of course, it does really matter and I think for some of us in the baby boom generation---in the black community, among the black students that I went to college [which college?] with there were a lot of people who were, like, the sons and daughters of teachers and social workers and cops and lawyers and other kinds of people who were doing those kinds of work. But it was only really hip and acceptable to be from the poorest part of the ghetto and in a lot of ways I think that does a disservice to the hard work that our parents did. So we did spend a lot of time talking about class and trying to figure that all out.

K: Was it a matter of trying to figure out how to stay connected with the black community or what does it mean to enter a different class level?

S: I think both. I think it can get really convoluted. Because there are a lot of these issues that are the same issues regardless of class or regardless of sexual orientation. Like the safety on the streets kind of issues. So I think some of it was trying to figure out how to articulate that in a way that---I don't know, I mean I guess sort of staying connected was in some ways not really an issue because we were connected, but how to talk about that [meant question as more of how they articulated that connection to the black community]. I mean, it's kind of even hard to know about how to get a handle on it now. So I think in some ways it was about what the analysis was and in some ways it was about, "What does this mean for practical actions and projects?" I can remember discussions about reactions---I'm thinking about Ishmael Reed and reading some of the other things that were in the black political intellectual press and talking about those and what kinds of responses we had to some of those things. I don't know whether---I mean, I think that individually people wrote letters to the editor and wrote articles and whatever. I don't recall being involved in composing an article that was going to go to---composing a letter that was going to go to some publication, but some of those kinds of conversations were involved in things that people were writing that then went out into the debate in the black community about what does it mean to be a black feminist.

K: So, given that people still make the same argument in the black community that, you know, you're not black enough if you are gay or lesbian or if you're---well, I guess the class issue manifests itself now in people accusing---I've been accused of "talking white" or "talking proper" and feminists---

S: That was happening in the fifties so that's not new.

K: Right. And, you know, feminism being a "white thing". How do you respond to those types accusations? Has it changed from how you responded when you were involved with Combahee?

S: I don't know, I think I have less patience with it than I did then. You know, it's stupid. There have always been black women involved in feminist issues and you can't really separate, you know, there are other people who've said it better than I have---than I will, but you can't separate being black from being a woman from being a lesbian. I mean, you get up in the morning and whatever kind of crap you deal with, you deal with as all of those things. And I think that black women have always responded, you know, struggled on all those issues, on all those fronts, at the same time. So I think that was one of the things we did talk about. How do you counter that? How do you explain to people that you don't---are you black first, are you a woman first, or are you a lesbian first? You're all those things at the same time. For good and for bad, as an experience of---both in the experience of discrimination and in the experience of resistance, that you're all of those things at the same time. Yeah. I think in some ways the class stuff is really---is a problem for us as a community that I don't know that we've really, that we have resolved. I don't know that it's gotten any better. I don't whether if it's gotten worse or not. I read a book last year called [tape ends]

[side B]

S: So I don't know. It seems to me like in some ways we're trying to talk about that with a little more sophistication, but I think there's a lot of---a lot of strong feeling that make it very difficult to do that; to analyze it and to really find a way to work with it. I think in some ways people are more divided now than we were say in the '40s.

K: Yeah. I read that book and also was trying to figure out how that is a function of class, too, like rising---I guess widening gaps really. Okay, well, I'm glad you brought that up because that was also a question I had had, you know, whether that was discussed as far as women in Combahee being academics or dealing with class, like, their own class issues.

S: Yeah, I think there was some---I don't know I think there's a certain polite assumption in American culture, generally, that everybody's middle class and anybody that you talk to when you're talking to them that you're both in the same class, which, of course, is not always true. But I think that the operated for us and in some cases it was true and in some cases it was not true. And then there was also a certain amount of, you know, people doing what you might call "jumping class" or moving to another class so that they were the first person in their family to go to college or they were the first person in their family to, you know, whatever. But I think in some ways it's like---I it was harder for us to have a really clear or really simplistic class analysis of class in the black community because, you know, everybody's got cousins who were higher or lower. At least in the group everybody had families who were---everybody had family who were much poorer or quite a bit better off. So there wasn't---it wasn't a real simple thing of my family is this.

K: Right.

S: So it was a very confusing thing.

K: Well, at least there was a forum for discussion to try to hammer it out.

S: Yeah. And I don't think we every really did talk about the color stuff. I think it was one of those things that was politically incorrect. And it was something that we just didn't talk about. Although I suspect there were probably some issues about being, you know, who was lighter and who was darker. I don't know that was necessarily something that played out in terms of who was the power, who were the central people. I don't think that was really it. I don't know.

color

K: So it just went unacknowledged as an issue that needed to be talked about?

S: I think so. And in some ways we had---we had other interpersonal issues that were more interesting and less threatening to deal with. If we were going to go into, you know, hidden agendas there was other stuff that was more fun and less scary.

K: That's a good thought.

S; [laughter] I don't know if it is.

K: Well, I should qualify "good". It's a compelling thought.